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ABC News Pays for Sakharov Tape

By PETER J. BOYER

For ABC News, the temptation proved irresistible. The network paid \$25,000, possibly to an agent of the K.G.B., for 18 minutes of videotape of Andrei D. Sakharov, the Soviet dissident living in internal exile in the city of Gorky.

ABC used about two and a half minutes of the tape on its "World News Tonight" last night, and also broadcast an interview with the physicist's wife, Yelena G. Bonner. Miss Bonner, who is in the United States, was allowed to go abroad for medical treatment after having pledged not to discuss her husband's case.

ABC News has a policy prohibiting paying "any illegal or unethical or in any way immoral or wrong elements of any society" for news footage, according to Robert Murphy, vice president of ABC News. The K.G.B. — the Soviet internal security agency — presumably fits that category, and Mr. Murphy admitted that it was probably the K.G.B. that produced, or at least condoned the release of, the videotape footage of Dr. Sakharov from the closed city of Gorky.

Worth Bending Policy

ABC News executives said they decided the pictures, which show Dr. Sakharov in a telephone booth conversing on the phone, pushing a snow-bound automobile and in a Gorky post office, were compelling enough to risk bending that policy.

"It's as close as you can get to a visual medical report," said Peter Jennings, anchor of "World News Tonight." "Does he look as good as the last time we saw him? Who's he with? What does he say? In a sense, it's keeping people in the West as aware as we can of how he may be doing."

The Bonn news bureaus of ABC, CBS and NBC were notified by the West German publication, Bild am Sonntag, that the videotape of Dr. Sakharov would be open for bidding. CBS and ABC participated in what one network executive termed "an auction" for the tape, and ABC won, paying a reported \$25,000 to the publication.

Where Bild obtained the videotape is uncertain, although news executives at all three networks assume it came from Victor Louis, a Soviet citizen who plays an unusual role in Moscow as an occasional source of information that the authorities do not wish to announce officially. Mr. Louis was reported to be the source of infor-

mation for Bild, which first announced that Miss Bonner would be allowed to go abroad.

Asked who he thought Mr. Louis worked for, David Buksbaum, a vice president of CBS News who conducted the bidding for CBS, said, "He's the guy the K.G.B. gives this stuff to."

Mr. Buksbaum said CBS News dropped out of the bidding because of "the source of it — what bothers us is the source of it."

Miss Bonner, who is staying in Boston for medical treatment, told ABC News she thought the footage was taken by the K.G.B. to show that her husband, Dr. Sakharov, was in good health.

Mr. Murphy of ABC conceded that the origin of the tape was murky, at best. "We know we're dealing with the K.G.B., or some part of the Soviet structure, when we deal with pictures taken in a closed Soviet city out in the open," Mr. Murphy said.

ABC used about two and a half minutes of the tape in its evening news report, with narration provided by Mr. Jennings, who noted that the pictures were available because Dr. Sakharov was "spied on with a camera" and that "someone with K.G.B. contacts" brokered the tape to the West.

The key to using such material, Mr. Jennings said, is to "qualify, qualify, qualify."

Lawrence K. Grossman, president of NBC News, said that NBC did not get in on the bidding because "we were concerned about the auspices" under which the tape was made available.

Miss Bonner, shown the footage, said, "It's made for the purpose of convincing us that everything is all right. In Gorky, Sakharov's very life is in danger. All of the contacts with people in the videotape are staged."

Mr. Murphy said that dealing with the K.G.B. for tape of a K.G.B. prisoner was "dicey," but ultimately worthwhile.

"Whenever you're dealing with a situation where somebody is being held against his will in a situation universally accepted as wrong, it's dicey to begin with," Mr. Murphy said. "The whole situation is dicey. We have to ask ourselves the question, is making those pictures public, is that a greater service than not dealing with the elements that are involved? In this situation, we say, making the pictures available in that context is something that is a net benefit for our audience."